EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF MASSACHUSETTS
PILOT DIALOGUE ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE CHURCH

PARTICIPANTS' CONSENSUS STATEMENT

September, 1998

Context

In 1997, the Public Conversations Project (PCP), an organization well known for its ability to bring people of opposing viewpoints together for constructive conversation (as opposed to polarized debate), was invited by Bishop M. Thomas Shaw, SSJE, and Gerry Dorman (Executive Director of the Massachusetts Chapter of Episcopalians United) to plan and facilitate a pilot dialogue on the subject of homosexuality and the church.

Participants known to have clearly articulated viewpoints about homosexuality and the church -- especially the "hot button" issues of ordination of non-celibate lesbians or gay men and the blessing of same-sex unions -- were invited by the Bishop's office to join in a dialogue. Four people represented each viewpoint. The group included clergy and lay people, and men and women, with a diversity of ethnic background and sexual orientation. Two facilitators from PCP, Laura Chasin and Robert Stains, met with the group as well. The goals for the conversation had been articulated by a planning group that included the bishop and Gerry Dorman, PCP staff, and two clergy member participants who hold contrasting views on the issues. The goals were:

(a) to speak honestly with humility and listen deeply with respect
(b) to explore our honest and heartfelt differences in the Church about homosexuality
(c) to discover together how we can remain in community despite our differences
(d) to create a model for dialogue that may prove useful for other Christians as they struggle with the issue.

Brief Overview of Sessions

The group first met in a retreat setting over a Friday night and Saturday in Febuary, 1998. There were three more meetings that took place in February and March. The first two were evening meetings and the fourth took all day on a Saturday. The first session of the retreat focused on orientation and on sharing stories concerning our faith and our hopes for the dialogue. Subsequent sessions deepened the discussion to include: life experiences that contributed to our commitment to the issues; what things are most "core" for us; and any possible mixed feelings, uncertainties, or value conflicts. At the end of the retreat, we formulated questions for each other member that addressed things we truly did not understand about the other's experience or viewpoint.

An important piece of the work in the subsequent sessions was sharing and answering the questions we had posed for each other. We then chose a subset of the questions to address in

more detail and prioritized them in order to discuss a few issues in depth. The major part of the last regularly scheduled session was devoted to scripture study (I Corinthians 6:9-20) and to a discussion of what we came to call the "big tent" question. This question was phrased as, "Can we creatively envision ways in which the church could be a 'big tent', made of a fabric that can stretch without ripping?" By prior arrangement, Bishop Shaw and Mr. Dorman were present for part of this meeting.

The group felt unfinished after the regularly scheduled meetings. In particular, there was insufficient time for closure as a community, and we wanted to find ways to share the fruits of our process. Accordingly, with one subsequent planning meeting, a weekend retreat, and many rounds of fax and email, the group produced three major products:

(a) a final report to Bishop and Mr. Dorman;
(b) a resource workbook for others who wish to use a similar process; and
(c) this Consensus Statement.

What Led to this Consensus Statement

Our facilitated dialogue created a safe space within which we were able to identify some areas of common ground that we could affirm together, articulate some areas of disagreement, and point out some areas in which the limitations of our own understanding prevent us from comprehending another's perspective. We called this "not understanding." In addition, we identified some hopes for the future. We recognized that one of the first steps toward deeper understanding and living in communion is to pull back from our "battle lines" so we may come to know one another as people and as Christians who are sincerely seeking to discern and follow the will of Christ. We were also inspired by a similar effort conducted over a three year period in the Anglican Church in Toronto, Canada. The rest of this document may be regarded as a "statement of progress so far." All eight members of our group have read it and agreed to it.

Basic Affirmations Arising Out Of Our Conversations

(a) We are committed to remaining in communion within the church, and acknowledge the need to examine our own attitudes, assumptions and actions as they contribute to or impede that communion.

(b) We take scripture seriously, and understand that no single text can be examined apart from the context of the larger biblical framework.

(c) We take the tradition of the Church seriously, and cannot lightly set aside the wisdom of the ages; nevertheless, we acknowledge that the Holy Spirit continually leads and guides the Church and calls us to remain open to fresh interpretations of God's word and will.

(d) We take the gift of human reason and experience seriously, and the need to inform our biblical and traditional understandings with a balanced study of the research on the physical and psychological causes and the lived experiences of people of differing sexual orientations.

(e) All of us value fidelity and condemn promiscuity, exploitativeness and violence in relationships.

(f) All of us deplore expressions of hatred and political and economic discrimination directed at gays and lesbians.

(g) All of us want our viewpoint to be heard and taken seriously by the church; each of us has at times felt unheard.

Basic Differences Not Resolved By Our Conversations

(a) We all take scripture seriously. However, we have found that our understandings of scripture differ.

(b) Some of us are inclined to begin our exploration of these matters from the perspective of our personal experience, to which scripture is then applied; others are inclined to begin with scripture, and then apply it to their personal experience.

(c) Our differing perspectives lead us to sharp differences in our understanding of the appropriate ministry the church is called to provide to persons of homosexual orientation. The most obvious area of differentiation concerns the appropriateness of ordaining homosexuals who are in committed relationships, and blessing same-sex unions.

(d) We do not agree on what the institutional church should do concerning these issues, except to continue to promote dialogue.

Things We Don't Understand

(a) There are many mysteries both in experience and in revelation.

(b) There is much about the origins and expression of sexuality that we do not understand.

(c) We observe that God is doing something in the lives of those on the "other side" - but we don't really understand what. For example, why does God seem to call some to change their viewpoints about these matters but not others?

Our Hopes For The Future

(a) That what we have done will become a model for others at the congregational level and in broader groupings.

(b) That our work will provide a useful model for the whole Church of a less confrontational style of conversation about these matters, avoiding the "winners versus losers" mentality so often present in more typical, confrontational debate.

(c) That the resources provided by the diocese and the larger church about the subjects of our dialogue will reflect a fair and balanced cross-section of views.

(d) That all who participate in these dialogues will take their learnings back into their everyday lives and be models of respectful and honest engagement with these issues.

HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH:

A Structured Dialogue for Parishes and Other Communities

A RESOURCE BOOK

FORWARD TO THIS EDITION

This edition comes to its readers directly from the collaboration of the eight participants and two facilitators who were involved in the pilot dialogue on *Homosexuality and the Episcopal Church* sponsored by Bishop Thomas Shaw, Diocese of Massachusetts, in 1998. This text outlines a structured conversation about sensitive and divisive topics that requires much of those who participate in it and offers much in return.

It is called "a semi-final draft" in deference to the certainty that feedback from readers who were not involved in the pilot project will necessitate clarifications, alterations, and additions to render this material user-friendly for other contexts. The intended audiences of this material are those who are considering convening, organizing and/or facilitating a dialogue on this topic along the lines presented in this text. The final draft should include everything organizers and experienced facilitators need to know to carry out their roles in ways that ensure a rewarding and constructive experience for those involved and their communities.

The authors are committed to the overall design which represents the best of what was tested in the pilot as well as improvements inspired by what worked less than well. However, minor changes in content, and significant changes in packaging, will be entertained on behalf of future users.

If this text falls into your hands, your prompt feedback is welcome. Please send your comments and suggestions to Laura Chasin or Robert Stains, Jr. at the Public Conversations Project, 46 Kondazian Street, Watertown, MA 02472-2832. Phone: 617/923-1216x17. Fax: 617/923-2757.
Email:lchasin@publicconversations.org.

The coordinators and editors of this draft acknowledge the committed and constructive participation of the eight participants in the pilot dialogue without whom this text would not have come into being. It is fitting that this forward ends with their names: Elinor Abbot, Lillian Chan, Barry A. Friswold, Leslie Horst, Reverend Bruce Jenneker, Reverend Christopher P. Leighton, Dr. John R. Peteet, and Reverend David G. Robinson, Jr.

OVERVIEW

PROGRAM

This program provides the resources for a facilitated dialogue among a small group of Christians who share a commitment to communicating respectfully and honestly with one another about the very divisive issue of homosexuality and faithful Christian living.

The goals of the dialogue are:

to explore honest and heartfelt differences about homosexuality;

to deepen mutual understanding;

to increase individual and collective capacity to speak honestly with humility and listen deeply with respect;

to generate fresh thinking about how we can remain in community despite our differences.

To reach these goals, participants will be asked to abide by a set of guidelines which experience has shown promote a safe, respectful atmosphere in which authentic speaking, receptive listening, and increased understanding can take place. Participants in this dialogue will not be asked to "agree" with what anyone else says about the matters under discussion or to change their minds about any of their views.

PARTICIPATION AND GROUND RULES

The conversation is designed for a balanced group of individuals who strongly hold differing perspectives about the issues and have:

an ability to be a good listener;

a commitment to learning about perspectives different from their own;

an ability to maintain the confidentiality of the conversation and the anonymity of the other participants;

an ability and willingness to abide by agreed-on ground rules;

sufficient autonomy to speak as an individual and to explore new thoughts and ideas, rather than acting on behalf of a 'side', an organization, or a constituency;

a commitment to participate fully in the conversation – attending all the sessions, and doing such preparation and follow-up as is necessary for each.

The success of the dialogue hinges on the participants' commitment to communicate constructively. Participants are asked to abide by a set of ground rules.

Ground Rules

- Seek understanding. Avoid persuasion;
- Use respectful language. Avoid disrespectful language;
- Speak to the particular individuals in the room. Avoid stereotypes;
- Express strong feelings in ways that promote contact and learning. Avoid words likely to raise listeners' defenses or increase antagonism and misunderstanding;
- Listen attentively and actively seek to understand all speakers, regardless of their views. Avoid making assumptions about their beliefs or motives or rehearsing a rebuttal while "listening".

Some of these communication ground rules can be difficult to follow. They are not "natural" for most of us. They require participants to slow down the conversation, search for new ways to present ideas and concerns, ask genuine questions of people with different views, and sometimes bite their tongues. A commitment to remain faithful to them has proven to be essential to creating and maintaining the safe and respectful atmosphere needed for a successful conversation.

DESIGN

A series of five meetings over ten weeks is proposed. The conversation is designed for a group of eight persons, two sets of four sharing similar perspectives, facilitated by two experienced facilitators. The first meeting is designed for a full day, the following four, for three hours. A day long version of the final meeting is included for groups that want to consider taking collective as well as individual follow-up steps.

Since community building is essential to the development of trust, getting to know one another in the first meeting and continuing to 'touch base' is critical to the success of the program. Planning to do the initial part of each meeting over a meal will enhance the process.

Meeting #1: Faith, Experience, Participation in this Dialogue

Morning Goals:

1) to begin building mutual understanding and trust;
2) to orient the participants to the program and its facilitation;
3) to begin the dialogue.

Afternoon Goals:

1) to practice dialogue skills;
2) to approach the topic of the dialogue;
3) to identify what participants wish to understand about one another.

Meeting #2: Deepening Mutual Understanding and Bridging to Scripture

Goals:

1) to continue the dialogue by responding to questions raised in Meeting #1;

2) to prepare for a dialogue about Scripture.

Meeting #3: Approaches to Scripture

Goals:

1) to continue the dialogue by discussion of Scripture;

2) to continue the conversation about sexuality and homosexuality begun in Meeting #1;

3) to consider the teachings of the faith regarding sexuality in everyday life.

Meeting #4: Scriptures, Faith, Sexuality and Homosexuality

Goal:

1) to continue the conversation about sexuality and homosexuality in the context of participants' faith and their views about Scripture and the church.

Meeting #5: Toward a More Christian Community; Harvesting the Fruits and Ending the Dialogue

Goals:

1) to focus and distill what the group has learned during this dialogue;

2) to sort out the implications of these learnings for other contexts;

3) to identify ways in which individuals intend to reap the fruits of the dialogue in the world;

4) to bring the dialogue to a meaningful close.

Additional goals for the day-long version of this meeting include:

1) to identify ways the group as a whole or a balanced subgroup can share the fruits of the dialogue with others;

2) to develop plans to do this.

STANDARD FORMAT FOR MOST MEETINGS

Orientation

Welcome and brief run through the goals and broad outline of the agenda. [5 minutes]

Touching Base

This is time for participants to connect personally. It can be more or less formal, more or less structured, as long as each person has a roughly equal chance to speak. Having this section take place during a meal or refreshments is highly desirable, especially at the first meeting. [30 minutes]

Prayer

A brief prayer is said or led by a different participant each time. [5 minutes]

Agenda, Organization and Resources

During this time the agenda is revisited in more detail, logistics are handled and handouts are distributed. [10 minutes]

Dialogue

This is the heart of each meeting. Attention turns to the carefully prepared discussion topic and a thoughtful sequence focuses and moves the conversation along. Although the overall sequence of issues and the framework for their consideration is established in advance and some starter questions are provided, participants are encouraged to raise their own questions about each session's topics. By filling the flexible interior of the structures provided with their questions and reflections, participants put their collective fingerprint on each dialogue giving it its own unique direction and texture. [1 hour and 45 minutes]

Feedback about The Meeting

This is a time for participants to say what worked and what was problematic about how the meeting went and to make suggestions for the conduct of the next one. [10 minutes]

Closing Sentence, Phrase or Metaphor

This is a time for those who want to punctuate the end of the dialogue section with a few words to say them. [5 minutes]

Closing Business: Questions and Assignments for Next Meeting

Closing business includes revisiting confidentiality, recruiting two people to lead the prayers at the following meeting, distributing preparatory readings and questions for reflection, and the logistics of between-meeting planning, if any is needed. [10 minutes]

Closing Prayer

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A detailed description of the five meeting plans written for potential conveners, organizers, and facilitators can be obtained from _____ by contacting _____.

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Homosexuality and the Episcopal Church

A Pilot Dialogue Series

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(b) to explore our honest and heartfelt differences in the Church about homosexuality;

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(d) to create a model for dialogue that may prove useful for other Christians as they struggle with the issue.

The dialogue extended over four meetings. The participants agreed to meet for an additional work retreat to develop the outlines of a resource for other Christians struggling with issues related to homosexuality and the church. The group also generated a consensus statement about the experience and what they had learned. Additional information about this series is in preparation. Please check our new website in March 1999 at www.publicconversations.org.

February 1999

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